

AMERICAN RULE IN PORTO RICO

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From Reportorio Americano, March 27, April 3

(COSTA RICAN POLITICAL WEEKLY)

July 29, 1922 Living Age Periodical

The war between the United States and Spain deprived the latter country of Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines. Spain's plenipotentiaries made a vigorous effort to salvage Porto Rico, but were finally induced to relinquish their country's rights to this ancient possession, after exacting from the delegates of the United States a formal promise as to the future government of the Island. The Spanish people felt no concern regarding the political institutions that the United States would set up in their former colony, for these would be determined by Congress at Washington - a legislative body that had always championed liberty and democracy in all parts of the world. Therefore, with this solemn promise in mind, Spain ratified the Treaty of Paris, by which Porto Rican people, though of Spanish stock, ceased to be part of the Spanish nation.

We natives of the Island witnessed this change of sovereignty with perfect confidence as to our future destiny. The people of the United States cherished liberal traditions. They had bathed their territory with their blood in order to abolish slavery. They had consistently preached to the world that humanity, liberty, and democracy were the only principles upon which a just government could rest. Therefore, we had full faith that this nation would endow Porto Rico with the liberty, democracy, and justice it professed.

Already, in 1897, Porto Rico had received from her mother country, Spain, an autonomous constitution; the distinguished statesman, Sigismond Moret, had proclaimed, in his celebrated address at Saragossa, that the civilization of Porto Rico entitled her people to govern themselves, and the Spanish Cortes declared Porto Rico a self-governing province, to be ruled by its own citizens. The Spanish flag was the only symbol of transatlantic sovereignty that remained. Consequently, when the North Americans came, we were justified in hoping, and even in demanding, that the rights

conferred upon us by our former mother-country should at least be preserved, if not extended.

The first days of a military conquest are invariably confused and chaotic. A great thinker has said that wolves always follow the footsteps of conquerors. That is precisely what happened here. The wolves came, hot-footed on the heels of the victors. A military government was set up, absolute and supreme. All power rested in the hands of a Yankee general. Our legislative chambers were closed. New courts were set up, with soldiers on the bench. A nation that hitherto had exercised freely the right of suffrage suddenly found itself under a mediaeval government, to which it must render unconditional obedience. This lasted but a short time. Unhappily, however, the next change was for the worse.

In 1900, the Congress of the United States conferred upon Porto Rico a civil government, with a legislature consisting of a senate and a lower house. There were eleven senators, six of whom were members of the Governor's cabinet, and the five others, men appointed by the President of the United States. The members of the lower house were elected by popular vote; but it will readily be seen that the influence of this body upon the practical operations of government was virtually nil.

As soon as this administration was set up, a wave of revolt swept over Porto Rico. New political parties were formed, one of which was bitterly opposed to the new order. I entered public life in 1902, together with many other young men, all graduates of American universities. Almost immediately a phenomenon worthy of note occurred. The men of my generation had been born at a time when the radical parties in Porto Rico were engaged in their long and bitter struggle against our Spanish rulers. We had grown up in an atmosphere of ardent longing to be free from Spain. We believed that every patriot should insist that Porto Rico become an independent republic, like her South American neighbors. All our political thinking and theories were based on these assumptions, at the time when we departed for the United States to study in the academic halls of the great Republic.

As students in American universities, we read and re-read the nation's great Declaration of Independence, and studied sedulously its Constitution and the principles upon which its government was formed, until we almost forgot the lessons of our earlier years. We spoke English better than our mother tongue. Our whole intellectual life was Anglo-Saxon. By the time we returned to Porto Rico, just as the United States was setting up a civil government in our homeland, we had thoroughly assimilated that nation's political ideals.

Naturally, we were ardent partisans of the Americanization of Porto Rico. But our old and battle-scarred leaders started an agitation against the new government Washington had imposed upon us, and when we had leisure to review our past, and to recall our glorious Castilian origin, we joined and speedily became the leaders of that movement. It fell to us, the graduates of American universities, to voice Porto Rico's protest, to give her people a political programme, to show the logic and reason of her demands, and to become the champions of our traditions and our race.

I fancied, when I graduated, that I possessed an immense fund of political wisdom. I was filled with ardent enthusiasm for the great struggles for freedom of thought, for separation of church and state, and for the rights of man. My political standards had been formed in accordance with these doctrines. But I had forgotten my soul, which still retained the memories of my Spanish childhood. The moment that my artificial student personality came into conflict with my true native personality, with the traditions of my race, as soon as I discovered that what I had learned in the United States was repudiated by the spontaneous sentiments of my heart, I realized that it was impossible to change that part of us which God has shaped with his own hand. I still cherished profound respect for all that was great and noble and just in the North American people; but my Spanish soul asserted itself. My fellow students of Spanish ancestry passed through the same experience. It seemed to us abnegation of our rights as men, apostasy to our own higher impulses, to act otherwise than as we did. So we threw ourselves headlong into the battle to rescue our indestructible heritage - our traditions, our race, our language, our religion.

It was clearly an unequal battle. A million and a quarter people, inhabiting thirty-six hundred square miles of territory, defied one hundred and fifteen million people, possessing more than three million miles of territory. But even these figures do not measure adequately the immense power of the United States, which America's leaders so confidently expected would speedily Americanize Porto Rico and demonstrate the ease with which Anglo-Saxon civilization can establish its sway over a Spanish-American people. But we were undaunted. Political delegations from North America, the pressure of North American capital, the political philosophy of that country's thinkers, the efforts of her representatives to deprive us of our civil rights and to rob us of our Spanish civilization - all these things counted as nothing against our enthusiasm, which burned the brighter after every attempt to quench it.

So we accepted the challenge of battle, although we still welcomed, small country that we were, whatever the United States could give us that did not prevent the free development of our Spanish culture. This struggle culminated in 1909. That year an effort was made to abolish the teaching of Spanish in the public schools. Our schoolmasters were ordered to give their instruction exclusively in English.

We knew perfectly well that the soul of a people is incarnated in its language. We would have preferred being without a country, to losing our native tongue. Upon this issue, we joined battle, and spontaneously my friends and I threw ourselves into the thickest of the fight. That was quite natural. But it was the children - children of six, seven, and ten years of age - who really started the revolt. They were the first to rebel. The men at the head of the government were first apprised of the resistance to substituting English for Spanish by a pupil's strike. Children refused to attend their classes unless they might be instructed in the language of their fathers and their country.

A resort to brutal measures followed. Children were expelled from the schools. Those who did not attend English classes, or who refused to be taught in that language were turned into the streets. They could not continue their studies; their future was ruined. Then we got together and

founded a Spanish school, - the Jose de Diego Institute, - where children expelled from the public schools were received and taught gratuitously.

We next appealed to the authorities at Washington. Immediately after President Wilson assumed office, we sent a commission to that city to describe the evils under which we were laboring. The President and the leaders of his party gave us a cordial welcome. A bill to confer upon us complete autonomy was submitted to Congress. Since that change could not be made immediately, Wilson sent a new Governor to the Island, to whom he gave most liberal instructions. All of the North American cabinet members were replaced by Porto Ricans.

At last we were given an autonomous regime. We elected our first independent legislature. My party, the party that championed a free Porto Rico, won in practically every precinct. The moment they had an opportunity to express their will, the Porto Rican people voted for liberty.

Then came the War. At the instance of the Administration, a bill was brought into Congress establishing compulsory military service, but expressly excluding Porto Ricans from this provision. Porto Rico protested at once, and insisted that her soldiers also should be sent to the battle fields of France, and should share both the sacrifices and the glories of our national victory. Her protest was heard. Our Island, with 1,300,000 inhabitants, mobilized 140,000 soldiers, among whom there was not a single deserter. We witnessed the unusual spectacle of a people, not themselves entirely free, ready to die for the freedom of another nation, even though it were under the flag of a Government that refused them their full rights.

After the War was over, and Wilson left office, the new Administration at Washington adopted an absolutely reactionary policy toward Porto Rico. In place of the Governor appointed by President Wilson, we received a man who had previously been a commercial traveler, or something of the sort, in his own country. As soon as he arrived in Porto Rico, he began to denounce, in violent discourses, our national aspirations. Six hours after his inauguration, the Unionist party took up the challenge. The whole Island

was aroused. The new Administration started out by dismissing Porto Rican officials, and replacing them with men from the United States.

So at present we are in a most unhappy situation, a situation likely to imperil seriously the good relations between our Island and the United States. The people of Porto Rico are more resolved than ever to resist such a reactionary policy, and are courageously confident that their protest will eventually be heard and their rights respected.

We cannot hold the noble people of North America responsible for the reprehensible deeds of an unjust and incompetent Governor, who has used the powers entrusted to him to serve men that are enriching themselves by oppressing a helpless community. The Porto Rican people rest their hope in a nation whose cemeteries in France are symbols of its love for liberty. We cannot conceive that the people of the United States, after liberating Poland and restoring Bohemia, will refuse freedom to Porto Rico, and thus create an Ireland in America.

What lesson does the recent history of Porto Rico, which we have here so briefly traced, teach to the Spanish-American nations? In the first place, that there are no grounds for fearing the results of the contact of Anglo-Saxon and Spanish civilization. That is the fundamental lesson. Marvelous progress in industry, science, and commerce, and a successful pursuit of riches are not, exclusively, the patrimony of the Anglo-Saxons. But our culture of two thousand years belongs to us alone.

By studying Anglo-Saxon methods and accomodating Anglo-Saxon institutions to our own ideals and temperament, we can create Spanish-American communities where all men are equal, where there is no hereditary privilege, where justice is unbought, where every man's home is his castle. But our efforts and sacrifices will amount to naught unless the Spanish-American nations realize that they must work shoulder to shoulder. Such a union of effort, however, means something far more permanent and enduring than our present Latin-American rallies and banquets, and our exhuberant floods of sentimental oratory.

We should bear in mind that we are one hundred and ten millions of people, that we dwell in the richest and most fertile territory upon the globe, and that nearly every great modern industry depends upon us for indispensable raw materials. Let us bear these facts steadily in mind as our gaze sweeps over the immense spaces of the American continent. Then we shall comprehend what Spanish-American union may come to mean; what the future of the Spanish race in the Western hemisphere may prove to be.